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The
All-Dominating Work



OPENING SERMON

OF

The General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church
in Canada, Preached at Vancouver, B.C.

June 9th, 1903

BY

REV. GEORGE BRYCE, D.D., LL.D., &c.

MODERATOR OF ASSEMBLY

1903

The All-Dominating Work

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada met on June 9th, 1903, in Vancouver city, British Columbia. A special "Assembly train" carried to their destination the large body of commissioners, comprising members from far eastern Sydney, in Nova Scotia, and from all intermediate points from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific. The journey from the east was begun on Monday, June 1st, and having passed one thousand miles of the Laurentian country north of the Great Lakes, and another thousand miles of prairie from Winnipeg westward, the "Special" rested on Saturday and Sabbath, 6th and 7th, at Banff—the Strathpeffer of Canada—in the heart of the Rocky Mountains. Thence over the mighty crest of the "Great Divide," through the picturesque Selkirks, and down the startling Fraser Canyon, the train with its three hundred passengers slowly wended its way, reaching Vancouver at 1 p. m., June 9th.

In the evening St. Andrew's church was filled to overflowing for the opening of the General Assembly. The clerks of the Assembly having taken their places on the platform, the retiring moderator, Rev. Dr. Bryce, of Winnipeg, ascended the pulpit and preached the following sermon: "The Lord doth build up Jerusalem; He gathereth together the outcasts of Israel." (Ps. 147: 2.)

Nehemiah, building up the walls of Jerusalem, said: "I am doing a great work, so I cannot come down." (Neh. 6: 3.)

Jerusalem, the joy of the whole earth, appealed powerfully alike to the Royal Psalmist, sinking in penitential sorrow, to the Evangelical prophet in his prophetic forecast, and to the unhappy exiles, including the zealous Nehemiah as they wept by the rivers of Babylon or in the far-off land of Elam.

Jerusalem, the golden, set on fire the saintly Benedictine, Bernard of Clairvaux, the world's great dreamer of Bedford jail, and the Apocalyptic seer, these all living many centuries apart, as they gazed into the invisible, seeing the new Jerusalem the Holy City!

Yet how great the contrast between the glorious city of the future and the Jerusalem of earth! In the Holy City there shall be no more curse, but Jerusalem, the earthly, from the time of the conquest of Canaan until its overthrow by Titus, suffered seventeen sieges.

The dangers and misfortunes of Jerusalem spoke more strongly to its friends than did even its lofty Mount Zion, beautiful for situation as it was, the type of the Heavenly City.

And the church of God on earth is faithfully represented by Jerusalem in her travail. The gospel of God is remedial. Christ the head of the church,

came to seek and to save the lost. The church's mission is to bring the gospel to a world sunk in sin and misery.

Thus to build up the towers of Zion, to close up like Nehemiah the breaches in the broken down walls of Jerusalem, to speak comfortably to her, and to gather to her the outcasts of Israel, is the great task in which the Lord is engaged, and in which Nehemiah and all other faithful souls are employed. This is the all-dominating work of pastor and people, of minister, elder, and communicant, of every one who loves Christ.

The Work is Imperious.

The builder cannot come down. As a true builder he is impressed with the greatness of his work, and cannot be diverted or turned aside. To be thus impressed he must be God-born. God-moulded, God-supported, and God-inspired. The spirit of the living God dwells in him. When this is the case then the Lord and he will be in sympathy with one another; when God provides the bricks and mortar he will build the wall; when God supplies the keystone he will put it on; when God sends a message of comfort to the people he will declare it with unction, with faithfulness, with adaptation; when God stretches forth His hand to save the outcasts, he will lay hold upon them and gather them in.

And how may this work be successful? Only as the worker learns from Jesus Christ, his brother and teacher, the way in which He did His Father's work. Oh, the compassionate heart of Christ! Oh, His infinite nearness to us! Oh, His matchless sorrow in bearing our sins! Oh, His oneness with us as his brethren and co-workers, in giving us the heart, and mind, and soul to do His work! How strenuous Christ was! How strenuous the Christ-bought and Christ-inspired worker will be!

Our great task must be to lead men to hear the gospel. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation. How is it to be preached so that it may reach men? There is no cabalistic, no mesmeric power in the gospel. It appeals to man's intelligence. If you cannot interest men you cannot reach them. A group of men, with its Matthew Arnolds, seeking intellectual impulse, comes saying, "Give us the gospel of culture and we will be satisfied." "Culture!" we answer. "Yes, give us all the culture possible. Paul, Luther, Chalmers, Edwards were versed in the learning of the schools, knew philosophy, theology, letters, but they used these only as feathers for the arrows which they sent flying into the souls of men."

Should preaching be heavy or elaborate? "Yes," was the answer once given, "if it is hot as well as heavy." But if what is wanted is culture with the supernatural eliminated, then perish this suggestion of the Sanballats and Tobiahs, for Christianity with the supernatural left out will die, as it deserves to do. To such solicitation we can only say, "We cannot come down."

The Formalist draws near to us and says, "Service is educative. Have attractive services. Have liturgy and music. Charm with the harmony of sweet sounds." Thus you may reach men with the gospel. We reply, "Yes, poetry and music are the product of inspired genius. Shall we use them? Surely. They are God's gifts. It is right to adopt the highest, purest music with which to praise God. It is right to sing as well as to preach the gospel. It is right to appropriate the highest flights of Shakespeare or Milton to illustrate, explain, or impress the gospel, but then it is not to be forgotten that it is the gospel we are preaching. If it is poetry for its own sake, we say, No! If music for its own sake, No! A service of praise with God left out, and only Handel and Mendelssohn left in, is a vain mockery. We may not so degrade the gospel of the Grace of God."

"Good taste will attract me," says the Aesthete. "I am alienated by the

carelessness and the crudeness of the pulpit. Good taste! yes, by all means listen to the voice of taste. Correct language, well composed sermons, well developed thought, are all too rare, and are very admirable. Taste should be carefully cultivated. But if it be the good taste of Pope, of the English Deists, of the fashionable set, who desire only rounded periods, no appeals to feeling, religion without excitement, reputable common-places with no dealing with religious states, we say, No! Where there is the spirit's work there will be passion, feeling, aspiration, earnestness. Surely all should be done 'decently and in order,' but if it be a call for respectable, formal inanities, for speaking of smooth things, we must refuse the Sanballat invitation."

Explicit, But Not Disputatious.

Again the man who is strenuous in the gospel sense has something to say and do. Nehemiah knew what he had to do. Men might call him narrow minded, a zealot, but he had one object before him, and toward this he constantly moved. Luther was more successful than Erasmus because he saw the path and followed it, when it was hazy and uncertain to his friend. And in doing the All-Dominating work the man must have a gospel of reality, of assertion, of confidence. Spiritual life cannot subsist on negatives. What makes the Shorter Catechism so admirable? It is short, but marvellous. It is powerful because it is positive. Direct statements about God, Christ, Justification by Faith, Repentance, Eternal life, and many other important points fill up this valuable compendium. The preacher must have faith in his message, else he should never fill the sacred office.

But may this be a parrot-like repetition of sound truth? Certainly not. Variety, freshness, are the only foundation of a long and efficient pastorate. "To this end," says the man of intellectual keenness and of ardent temper, "give us the history of doctrine, and the apologetic of religion." Our answer is, No! We have to preach the gospel. Every positive statement in our standards may bear the trace upon it of the fight against heresy, but it is not an answer to heresy. It gives the definite, positive statement on the subject. The merely apologetic preacher will not win souls to Christ by his method. I once heard at one of Moody's meetings in Edinburgh, a prominent lawyer say that he had formerly been an unbeliever, and had read widely on Apologetic literature all to no purpose. He heard the simple gospel preached by Moody, believed in it, and his doubts vanished. Yes, brethren, we are bound to preach a positive, but not disputatious gospel. The presentation of the burning love of Christ, with its kaleidoscopic views in prophecy, biography, eastern customs, proverbial wisdom, Pauline discussion, but especially in the pictures of the four gospels, will be a perennial spring of interest and converting power to the studious preacher.

"But," says many an earnest pastor, "Heresy is rife. Other denominations are aggressive. They undermine the faith of the uninstructed young people. I'll give a series of sermons on the divine character of Presbytery and the vanity of sacerdotalism, or a blast against the Arminians, or enter on a platform—controversy on baptism, or make a denunciation of Christian Science." Brother, I entirely dissent from any of these plans, in the church, the Bible class, or the Sunday school. Such steps sow the seeds of bitterness, are usually ineffective, and being based on a fallacy are unnecessary. I cannot remember to have preached a sectarian sermon during a ministry of thirty-two years. I have never found time. We cannot come down. St. Paul speaks of insidious heresies of the last times. He does not say, "be the inquisitor, the controversialist, the platform protagonist," but advises, "continue thou in the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation

through faith which is in Christ Jesus." Nehemiah did not go down to Sanballat and Tobiah to argue with them.

But in this quest for variety, for interest, the theological graduate or the bookish preacher may be led to bring into the pulpit questions of criticism, disquisitions as to the sources of Scripture documents, what we call the embryonic history of the Bible. Is this class of study valuable? Surely it is. We as a church believe in full investigation. We have nothing to hide. We have no clandestine conclaves. We want every student to be fully instructed in Biblical literature. I may say, also, that in my opinion the so-called Higher Criticism movement of the last twenty-five years has done good. It has reminded us that the Bible is not a mere ecclesiastical preserve; it has shown us clearly the human element in the Bible, but has in doing this, brought us face to face, in numberless cases, with the divine as the only intelligible explanation of the facts, and it has done away with the charge that religious teachers hold the truth as dogma, and without investigation. All this is a gain, but this line of investigation is for the college, not for the forum, for the study not for the pulpit. It is, after all, the mere husk of truth. What we need in the pulpit and the Sunday school class is the kernel, the truth as it is in Christ Jesus. That only can save the soul. Foolish and unlearned questions we are to avoid, since they gender strife, and also for the sake of the hungry sheep that look up to be fed we should avoid unprofitable questions, even if they are learned.

Not Mere Worldly Aspirations.

Further, we are doing a great work and cannot come down to mere worldly aspirations. In our church and in our congregations there is no doubt a large share of the worldly prosperity which God has granted to the Canadian people. This is universally conceded. In this, brethren, there is a snare. To feel the sense of superiority is the spirit of the ecclesiastic and not of the Christian. The world is apt to see, and rightly, an inconsistency in this kind of religion. Moses had to choose between the reproach of Christ and the treasures of Egypt. The Christian must in some true sense feel this reproach. Humility must be the ideal, especially of the Christian minister or elder. I think it is to the pastors and officers of the church that St. Peter says they are not to aim at being lords over God's heritage. It was to the Apostles, and we claim to be their successors, that it was said, while the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion and authority, "it shall not be so among you." Nehemiah had the high dream of a perfected Jerusalem, and could not come down even to consider Sanballat's worldly propositions.

Nor, brethren, should the minister engage himself with doing things not legitimately connected with his office. Some do almost all that should be done in their parishes except study and prepare for preaching. On a memorable occasion, which stands for all time, the twelve apostles called the multitude of the disciples together and said, "It is not reason that we should leave the word of God and serve tables." Brethren, one great evil I see in our Canadian church to-day is that often the minister has not a high enough ideal of preaching. He organizes everything in his church, even to the sports, is a leader in getting up entertainments, with a perfectly good motive spends much of his time in society, in some cases (and we admire him for it), devotes attention to charities, consulting with people in distressed circumstances, finding situations for new comers, and writing letters for and about people, but often in order to do this he has to leave the Word of God. There ought to be a division of this labor. Other Christian workers should take more responsibility. That is the Apostolic model, and is so arranged that the minister may devote himself to "prayer and the ministry of the Word." I am old fashioned enough

to think that some of our modern methods are neither scriptural, apostolical, nor reasonable, and that the fallacy is often more in the minds of the people than in that of the minister.

This is a Great Work.

To have any share in building up the walls of Jerusalem is great work. It is the Lord who is building, and the Psalmist says, "His work is honorable and glorious." It is of the Lord's infinite mercy that He allows any of us unworthy as we are, to do any work whatever for him. His most efficient and most trusted servants have ever felt this. There are many branches or departments of this service, but they are equally honorable, for all the Lord's servants wear the same livery. The Sunday school teacher and the professor of Theology are on the same plane of honor. The ordained missionary and the experienced city pastor are equal in the Lord's sight. The village pastor, passing rich on £40 a year, and the world-renowned foreign missionary are co-laborers, each receiving his penny from his Master. I have heard in the General Assembly an antithesis made between the pastor and professor. This is wrong. They are all needed. The hand cannot say to the foot, I have no need of thee. All are on the same level, except this, that when we make our distorted human distinctions, the Lord may say some day "The first shall be last, and the last shall be first."

Sometimes the laborers, and how sad it is, depreciate their own great work. The young missionary complains that he has only thirty families in his field; the minister of the supplemented charge with his forty families, that he has not work enough to do; the settled pastor with fifty families says he has no room for development—and all these are restless and unhappy in their work because they aim at something larger. Brethren, this spirit is most disastrous to a man's success. No man can succeed who does not like his work. But the work of God is so honorable that any one of these spheres is worthy of the effort of the highest intellect within our borders. To be a father to his people, to study the case of every family and individual, to mould the lives of the children as they grow up, to feel the responsibility of standing at the bar of God to answer for the two hundred men, women and children of a charge, is a weight too heavy for any one of us, were not the Lord, too, building up our Jerusalem. Think of the value of one human soul! How great the value of a human life! How great the Lord's work is!

And if the work of one congregation is so good, how vastly great the interests and concerns of 219,570 (1901) communicants, of 118,114 (1901) families, and the 842,442 (1901) human souls under the care of the General Assembly, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and in our missions in China, Japan, India, the West Indies, and the South Seas.

How considerable is our equipment at the present time! God has given our people means; He is suggesting to the hearts of suitable young men in our most godly homes, to enter on the work of the ministry; He has put it into the heart of our church to found and equip in the greater centres of population five colleges, manned by men of learning and spiritual power; He has inspired our people through the whole Dominion to desire religious ordinances for themselves and their children, and to deny themselves and make sacrifices to obtain these privileges; He has given us a power of executive in our Presbyterian Church which enables the strong to help the weak; He is awakening in our bosoms a strong missionary zeal to seek the godless, the indifferent, the forlorn, and the outcast, and to gather them into Zion.

Our Great Opportunity.

Think of the great opportunity the Lord has given us in the generation

since the Confederation era, when Canada, from being a line of helpless provinces became a united people, with a continental outlook. Then she saw the vision of a nation rising before her. Then she saw before her eyes a vast extent of country, of great resources, given her to people and build up in social and political institutions worthy of her lineage and position and creed. Then she first realized the possibility of taking her place among the nations of the earth. Canada is, to all intents and purposes, a nation—one of the nations of the British Empire to-day.

But this God-given opportunity brings with it a heavy responsibility. The ascending Lord said, "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature." He would gather the outcasts of his own people and of the heathen into Zion. Bands of strangers in our centres of population—Chinese, Jews, Italians, and others in our land who are ignorant and superstitious, need our help. We meet them every day. No doubt many of them are sadly saying to themselves, "There is no man to care for my soul." Are we stretching forth our hands strenuously in response to his call? Not to obey His command is to despise Him.

Besides, we have broken places in the walls of our Jerusalem. Places not thriving, congregations here and there discouraged, ministers unhappy. Are we building up these waste places? Cannot we devise better things? Perhaps by mutual exchange of pastors our Presbyteries might give new life to men and congregations. It is not always more moneyed aid that is needed, it is sometimes inspiration. Let us encourage our brethren.

Then the care of our aged ministers, our pioneers, and the widows of those who, after rendering valliant service, have gone to their reward, presses upon us. We have a call to speak comfortably to Jerusalem. I trust we shall be able to give these deserving ones a comfortable allowance. Few things are more needed for strengthening the walls of Zion than a plan which will allow our honored, but infirm or exhausted ministers, to leave the field to others.

But, brethren, the great pressing problem of our church, along with missions for the heathen, and colleges to provide men for all departments, is

The West.

No church in the world, at any rate of our size, has such a field calling upon it. Since 1871 the nine preaching places west of Lake Superior have become some fourteen hundred. I have assurance from a government official that three weeks ago 75,000 immigrants had this season entered the west, and competent authorities count on 120,000 this year. Think what this means! What an opportunity! Are we equal to it? Are we to retain our Canadian Sabbath? Can we hold our Canadian customs and ideals? Shall we maintain our boasted regard for law and order? Will the gospel reach the corners of our land?

Two instruments are in our hands—the public school and the church. The fields are white for the harvest!

O Lord, give us twice as many students in our colleges! O Lord, keep us from following trifles! O Lord, preserve us from lives of ease and indifference! O Lord, show us Thy way! O Lord, give each of us the willingness to go where he is needed—to say

"And I?

Is there some desert or some pathless sea

Where Thou, good God of angels, wilt send me?

Some oak for me to rend; some sod,
Some rock for me to break;
Some handful of his corn to take
And scatter far afield,
'Till it in turn shall yield
Its hundredfold
Of grain of gold

To feed the waiting children of my God?
Show me the desert, Father, or the sea,
Is it Thine enterprise? Great God, send me.
And though this body lie where ocean rolls,
Count me among all Faithful Souls."



